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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women

Statement submitted by Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

The Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP) is an umbrella body which works to increase women's influence and participation in public and political life and contributes to the development of positive social, economic and environmental policies for women. It also works to ensure that women from Northern Ireland have a voice at national and international level by working with organisations in England, Scotland and Wales known as the UK Joint Committee on Women, and at a European level as a member of the European Women's Lobby, the largest umbrella organisations of women's associations in the European Union.

NIWEP's review of the agreed conclusions endorsed by the Economic and Social Council at the Forty-eighth session, Women's Equal participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution and in post-conflict peace-building, has concluded that the commitment by member states to positive action measures to implement each conclusion has not yet been realised.

Northern Ireland is a society emerging from 30 years of conflict and while the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which underpinned the peace process, committed to the 'full and equal participation of women in public life,' women from Northern Ireland have remained largely excluded from participation in institutions that are most directly concerned with conflict resolution. This lack of gender parity throughout our society is, NIWEP contends, a key factor in hindering the development of a new, shared future.

Below are some examples that illustrate this continuing under-representation of women in political and public life.

Political Life

In the 2007 elections to the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly, only 18 women were elected out of 108 members. While 4 women hold Ministerial office in the power-sharing Executive, there are no women in any of the other senior positions. For example, none of the 5 Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioners, the Speaker or the 3 Assembly Deputy Speakers are women.

In relation to Assembly Committees, out of eleven Statutory Committees, six Standing Committees and two Ad Hoc Committees only two women hold positions as Committee Chairs and two as Vice Chairs. The purpose of one of the Ad Hoc Committees is to consider the proposed draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2007. The draft legislation covers a wide range of issues including new sentencing powers, risk assessment and management of certain offenders; new road traffic offences; and alcohol-related offences. There is only one woman out of eleven on this Committee.

Following a review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland, there are plans to adopt new local government structures which will reduce the number of local governments. There are no plans by the government to gender proof the new structures or to encourage political parties under the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 to adopt positive measures to reduce inequality

between the numbers of men and women elected to the local government. With fewer political positions and no guidance for equality this will have an adverse effect on women.

Public Appointments

Public bodies play a major role in the lives of everyone in Northern Ireland. For example, they run many of the services we use every day such as health and education. However, despite the setting of targets, women's representation on public bodies has decreased over the past ten years. In 1996-97 35% of women were appointed to public bodies with 28% of Chairs being women. In 2005-6 the number of appointments had fallen to 32% with only 25% of Chairs being women.

Judicial Appointments

In Northern Ireland none of the High Court Judges is female. Research conducted in 2005 analysing women in judicial posts and senior barristers concluded that the number of women in top posts is considerably smaller that in the rest of the United Kingdom, and even worse when compared to other countries. 166 women (18%) hold legal office ranging from county court judges to chairs of tribunals.

Policing

While over two thirds of the support staff in policing are women, just over 20% of full-time police officers are women and in senior positions they are relatively few. As part of the peace process positive action legislation was enacted to ensure that the recruitment process to the new policing service redressed the previous religious imbalance. However, no such action has been implemented on gender.

Women's Groups/Organisations

Women's groups mobilised during the worst of the conflict and were actively building bridges between different communities long before the official peace negotiations began. Instead of focusing on old injustices they discussed solutions and strategies for healthcare and education etc. and established training and development programmes and support networks. Many of these groups are now under threat due to a lack of resources and no positive commitment from government to address the deficit caused by the ending of European funding.

Women's rural networks are either closing or attempting to provide a service with no resources. The ability of women's groups and organisations to develop social capital is constrained by this lack of support from official government sources, while such resources are poured into other sectors that are courted by agencies interested in ending conflict. A vibrant Northern Ireland women's sector is now facing crisis in terms of long-term sustainability.

In many areas in Northern Ireland where people have experienced acute inter-communal violence, the ability of female activists to provide positive role modelling and actions rooted in reconciliation needs support in the face of dominance by male community leaders following different agendas, often of a

paramilitary nature. Building and re-building civil society requires commitment to community development principles and practices, as well as adequate funding to sustain grass roots activities. Government needs to recognise the overall importance of the work of the women's sector in peace building.

Conclusion

Women in Northern Ireland continue to be under-represented in key institutions and bodies that are highly influential and control most of the important resources in Northern Ireland – including bodies established as part of the peace process. The exclusion of a critical mass of women from the political institutions tasked with progressing the peace process means the end result will be shaped by men's priorities and will not facilitate women's concerns or their practical involvement in political life.

The task of ending conflict and building peace cannot take place in the absence of an attempt to ensure gender equality and eradicate the inequality that both derives from and feeds conflict. However, the recent Programme for Government and the budget attached to it does not contain a commitment to mainstream the experience, skills and programmes of the women's sector into post-conflict arrangements for social reconstruction.

Demands for clear commitment to human rights have made some progress, but pressure from the international community is needed to prioritise, for example, human rights retraining of the judiciary or the formal incorporation of women into peace negotiations in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

On a more positive note, there are many experiences in Northern Ireland in building trust and co-operation amongst women from different social, religious and political backgrounds in the context of dealing with conflict and peace building. There are important lessons to be learnt from these and we are willing to share our experiences around building community cohesion.